

Statement of Morris D. Andrews

At the

Public Hearing

Before the

Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding

On

School Funding Recommendations from the Final Report of the Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools

June 4, 2018

Chairman Olson and Chairman Kitchens and members of the commission, thank you for allowing me to testify at this hearing which is being held to learn more about school funding issues in Wisconsin.

I was the Executive Secretary of the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), a statewide organization that represents public education employees, from 1973 to 1993. I was a public school teacher and coach for ten years. Since retiring from WEAC, I have had numerous private consulting contracts ranging from UW Hospitals & Clinics, WE Energies, the bond referendum to build the Monona Terrace Convention Center, among others. I am, however, most passionate about the quality and sustainability of Wisconsin public schools.

- In 2017-18, Wisconsin had 224 school districts with enrollments of 1,000 or less. These school districts had a total student population of 117,897, or 13.8 percent of Wisconsin's enrollments. However, the 224 school districts were 53 percent of Wisconsin school districts and covered more than 60 percent of Wisconsin's land mass.
- The schools with enrollments of 1,000 or less had .53 more special need students than did all Wisconsin school districts. These student costs are higher to provide than costs to non-special need students. Thus, higher costs are impacting the budgets of school districts of smaller scale.
- The schools with enrollments of 1,000 or less had .8 percent less students whose primary language was other than English. Thus, these districts are having their budgets impacted by lower costs than the other 198 school districts with 601,483 students – 72 percent of the total Wisconsin enrollment.
- The schools with enrollments of 1,000 or less had 36.56 percent of their students coming from families that are economically disadvantaged. The 198 larger school districts had 38.27 percent of their students coming from families that are economically disadvantaged. In addition, the 198 larger school district budgets are typically at least four times larger than the smaller school districts, which provides more ability to accommodate cost increases with less adverse impacts upon their student educational programming.

- In 2001, Wisconsin K-12 school districts had 20.79 percent of their enrollment coming from families with incomes below the U.S. poverty level. The Wisconsin school district poverty level was 12.5 percent less than the U.S. average poverty level. Wisconsin had the lowest poverty of Midwestern states in 2000-01. By 2016, the Wisconsin school district poverty level had nearly doubled to 40.08 percent and had moved up from lowest to third lowest in Midwestern states.

In Wisconsin, during 2001-16, only 17 counties had school district enrollments increases, as follows:

County Enrollment 2001-2016	Increase in Enrollment
Dane	7,095
Brown	5,108
Fond du Lac	4,805
Outagamie	4,038
St. Croix	3,037
Kenosha	1,223
Walworth	1,176
Chippewa	554
La Crosse	455
Washington	408
Monroe	355
Dodge	351
Sauk	178
Kewaunee	89
Trempealeau	80
Crawford	58
Pierce	15
TOTAL	29,025 (23.6 percent)

Decreasing school enrollments are causing havoc on the educational programming of small, rural Wisconsin school districts. As state aids decrease and cost controls bite more, the only escape valve for rural schools is to increase revenue through passage of local school property taxes by referenda.

New school aid factors to help rural school districts provide sufficient education to their students without having to pass ever-increasing property tax increases to fund local rural school districts is essential.

Specifically, the following nine recommendations should be strongly considered:

1. Weight poverty students to start to reduce the ever-increasing proportion of students coming from families of poverty.
2. Weight students who come to school from families where English is a second language.
3. Weight special education students to start to cover the higher costs of their education.

4. Change the equalization factor to the county per household income average instead of the guaranteed property tax factor. Taxpayers pay their school taxes with income not property taxes.
5. School district revenue limits should be allowed to use the enrollment that is the highest enrollment in the last five years.
6. Change the high cost transportation aid provision in the state budget to a sum sufficient appropriation.
7. Allow rural school districts of 1,000 or less to obtain electricity from one Wisconsin Cooperative, Municipal or Stockholder owned company, using one competitive bid process.
8. Allow rural school districts of 1,000 or less to obtain natural gas from one Wisconsin Cooperative, Municipal or Stockholder owned company, using one competitive bid process.
9. Allow rural school districts of 1,000 or less to obtain gasoline, diesel fuel from a Wisconsin provider, using one competitive bid process.

Rural school districts are the identity and center of communities in rural Wisconsin. At the present time, rural communities are under great stress and danger of non-existence. We have it in our power through our decisions to ensure the safety and future of Wisconsin's rural communities.